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Review of the book 'The mind club: Who thinks, what feels and why it matters' by D.M. Wegner & K. Gray

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The Mind Club: Who Thinks, What Feels and Why it Matters

Daniel M. Wegner & Kurt Gray

Viking Press (2016)

ISBN: 978-0670785834

Paperback – 400pp – £19.89

Reviewed by Karolina Urbanska

The first rule of the mind club is: decide who is in and who is out. In *The Mind Club*, Wegner and Gray take on the task of demonstrating how the perception of mind influences moral judgements as discussed in the landmark *Psychological Inquiry* 2012 paper (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). Written in accessible, everyday language, the book demonstrates how decisions on the mind club admittance can guide our behaviour and explain contentious issues, such as euthanasia, or psychological phenomena such as belief in conspiracy theories.

Wegner and Kurt set out two criteria for determining perception of mind: agency and experience. That is, to be perceived as possessing mind, one must own a capability to act and make free decisions (i.e. possess agency) and a capability to experience emotions (possess experience). Perception is the key phrase here: one cannot know for definite that others have these qualities; we simply attribute these qualities to others based on our beliefs. The authors systematically apply these perceived criteria to explain everyday behaviour. The book, therefore, takes the reader through an array of examples, in each case establishing how perceptions of agency and experience make us think about others and their actions. Particularly relevant here is the idea of moral typecasting (Gray & Wegner, 2009), which the authors employ throughout the chapters of the book: once someone is perceived as a victim, it is very difficult to perceive them as the cruel harm-doer and vice-versa. Consequently, the authors explain how psychopaths can perceive the other's mind, but they deny experience to

their victims. Similarly, big corporations are perceived as agents, but it is very difficult for people to see them as victims. The authors state that this lack of experience is what makes it very difficult to empathise with psychopaths or corporations. At the other side of the extreme are ‘feelers’ who are incapable of causing harm but are perceived through a lens of empathy, such as orphans. Furthermore, the authors explain a related idea; tendency for dyadic completion (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014). That is, harm is attributed to an agent and is received by a victim. Where there is a victim, there must be an agent; where harm is being done, someone must be suffering. Therefore, the authors successfully provide an overview of the key concepts and theories in the moral psychology literature.

In the book, entities, such as robots, God and animals are discussed in detail. Within those entities, the authors explain the most popular phenomena. Readers can find answers to questions such as why do we find robots that are very similar to humans creepy? Why are wealthy people less religious than poor people? As such, ‘The Mind Club’ provides an integrating theoretical framework to understand a range of human behaviour. The book is a model example of well informed, research-based popular psychology book, which can also serve as an introductory text for psychology students. Although morality research is the main area of interest for the book, Wegner and Gray familiarise the reader with a range of psychological research across all areas beginning from sexism theories (Glick & Fiske, 1996), eye-tracking studies in autism (Boraston & Blakemore, 2007) to terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1990), and they also do not shy away from philosophical questions about mind.

The authors go out of their way to bring scientific theories to understand everyday life phenomena by offering applied examples to support their claims. Consequently, the book features numerous news stories from around the world, which demonstrate the importance of the theories presented in action, providing them with face validity. Linking stories with

research allows the reader to appreciate how laboratory research directly applies to studying of human behaviour. The book exerts the balance of feelings of entertainment with fascination. On one hand, the writing style switches between being light-hearted and humorous and truly thought-provoking.

As such, this publication is an excellent piece of promotion for the work of Mind Perception and Morality lab, based in University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. As I read it, it reminded me why we engage in science and communicate our findings to others. We provide answers to questions that are of relevance to providing insight to our behaviour. Ultimate goal of each of the scholars is to be able to produce a comprehensive publication such as this one to be able to pinpoint pieces and say: 'Here is how I contributed to this research.' *The Mind Club* is not just an outcome of social psychology research, but it demonstrates how research in moral psychology can integrate insights from other areas of psychology.

As a social psychologist reading the book, it is a shame that authors did not consider social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which could provide a lot more insight into the chapter on groups. Reflection on this theory would also prevent the authors of falling into the trap of misinterpreting the famous Milgram's (1963) experiments. Recent work on the so-called 'blind obedience' studies (see Haslam, Reicher, & Birney, 2014) questions that obeying Milgram's orders was just simply following orders and suggests that participants actively identified with Milgram and his enterprise of advancing science. Therefore, participants were engaging in active followership, as opposed to passively submitting to authority. This explanation, however, is not too convenient for the argument authors tried to put across: one that individuals have poor self-insight and that people cannot really predict how they would behave.

Perhaps one inconvenience was the use of Vancouver referencing style which meant flipping between the core text and the reference list to follow-up on the citation. However, it is a completely understandable choice given that the target audience would be a member of the public, who perhaps is not as interested in the details regarding the quality of research. Alluding to the referencing style as a disappointment is perhaps just a good indication of the high standard of this publication. I thoroughly enjoyed immersing into *The Mind Club* and would recommend for both academic and lay audiences.

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